

Forest Service Fire Management in the Gorge

An Interview with Roland Rose Fire Fuels Planner and Battalion Chief, US Forest Service, Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area



Figure 1 Figure 1: Pile burning photo taken this winter by Department of Natural Resources Forest Crew Leader Jerome Mattila. Note in the photo how the piles on the left side of the frame are just getting lit and are putting up more smoke because they aren't very hot yet. Compare that to the piles on the right side of the frame have warmed up and the smoke is almost non-existent. This is why we cover our piles and ensure they cure.

What is the role of the USFS fire program in Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGNSA)?

Our Fire Team at the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area (CRGNSA) is an integrated group made up of full-time firefighters and employees in other resource areas. We work in partnership with other Agencies to combat the negative effects of wildfire while promoting and implementing the restoration of fire dependent habitats.

How does the program manage fire year round? What do fire managers do in the winter season?

Our fire program manages and fights fire across the nation, but these experts also help with multiple restoration and recreation projects that happen in the winter season. This work involves monitoring fire work that has been completed in the past and setting up contracts or agreements to help get restoration work done that will help integrate fire resiliency across the landscape. Fire professionals work with other resource areas to develop long term plans for several areas in the gorge in order to

restore a variety of habitat and ecosystem components. Winter is also our main time to get fire planning and training done for the upcoming season.

Training, coordinating training and hiring is a large part of what our **Operational Assistant Fire Manager** Loretta Duke, does in the winter season. She also helps prioritize where our Captains will implement work, whether that be felling hazard trees, clearing trails or burning.

Our **Fire Captains**: Chris Harper, Walter Vicente and Andrew Myhra, do a great job of coordinating their schedules to ensure hiring and training gets accomplished while still taking on a huge amount of project work in the off season. This winter they have spent any of their available free time helping with the



Figure 2 Figure 3 Roland Rose creating a snag by topping the tree and in the process also creating bat slits in the tree and creating a perch for birds.

Eagle Creek Fire recovery, mainly in the form of trail work and hazard tree felling. As the fire season gets closer they will migrate towards ensuring their resources are poised for initial attack of new fire starts. In the winter season they are often travelling to help with prescribed burning in other areas or helping facilitate fire trainings.

Our **Fire Management Officer**, Bart Kicklighter, spends much of his time this year ensuring our relationships with our cooperating agencies are reinforced. We have 37 Cooperating Fire entities we respond with, not including Law Enforcement. He is currently working with two different County Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP). He is also our link to our Forest Service Leadership Team, ensuring the fire program is kept abreast of all the different projects going on within the Scenic Area, and that our priorities are set appropriately.

I am the **Fire Fuels Planner** in the Scenic Area and I take the lead on developing and implementing restoration projects with other resource areas, setting up contracts and agreements, monitoring work that has been done, and planning for future work. There are often a number of training events and presentations that he will host or help with in the winter season.

With the Eagle Creek Fire repair work still in full swing many of the fire officers have taken turns as the **Incident Commander**. One of our Captains is detailed this winter into a [Burned Area Emergency Response \(BAER\)](#) Implementation role in which he helps coordinate multiple projects.



Most years we will integrate some *underburning* at the tail end of fire season before it gets too wet for fire to carry. Then after the ground becomes so saturated that fire can no longer support fire we move into *pile burning*. This year we finished up our pile burning in January.

As the snow goes away you will see our Fire Team get heavily involved in both falling hazard trees and climbing trees as well as trail work. We have a saw program that gets requested to help with trainings on other

units and with other agencies. We have a climbing program with three in house instructors and we typically host one basic tree climbing class a year and one National Advanced Heavy Rigging class a year.

This work is done for a variety of program areas and partners. About half of our climbing work is dealing with *hazard trees*, but the other half is *improving habitat for different species*.

What is pile burning? What is under-burning?



Underburning is when we burn an area between pre-established control lines with very specific fire intensity objectives. We may be trying to thin out underbrush or small trees, we may be trying to harden the cambium on Ponderosa pines or just reducing the amount of flashy woody debris and grasses. This is done with a prescription very specific to the objectives of the underburn. An example might be to thin out 80% of the sub 2" Douglas fir trees while limiting mortality of Oak trees larger than 10" to 10% by using a 3' to 5' flanking fire while ensuring smoke travels in a NE direction dispersing before it gets to a specific town.



However, often areas that have not seen gentle fire in a long period have so much undergrowth that they cannot safely be treated with an underburn. This is where thinning with chainsaws or equipment often comes in. In some places where there is a large concentration of fuels, we will thin with fire crews and contractors and stack the cut small trees in piles that we can later burn. After the piles cure for a year or two in order to reduce the potential smoke we pick appropriate conditions to ensure the burn doesn't escape and the impact from smoke is minimized.

To accomplish this, the Scenic Area Manager makes the final call if we will burn at any given time or not. We utilize our partnerships to effectively implement these important prescriptive burns, often having more than three agencies involved with any given underburn.

Who does the Forest Service partner with to help meet fire program goals?



Figure 3 Figure 5 Panorama of structure point protection at Multnomah Falls Lodge September 6, 2017.

We have about 37 cooperating fire entities here at the Scenic Area. Those include four State programs, two National Forests, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and a huge number of Fire Districts and Municipal Departments. You may see US Forest

Service fire staff help teach a class with Portland Fire one day, then help Oregon Department of Forestry with a thinning project south of The Dalles, OR the next day. With the Gorge being more than 60 miles long, and the Forest Service only having only two full time initial attack engines and often getting multiple starts in a day, it is critical to have partners to rely on. We are very fortunate here at the Scenic Area that our fire partnerships allow us to help each other with fires and with some prescribed burning as well. You will often see Forest Service fire officers help manage fires on other agency units, but the favor is repaid. We have had a few instances where we rely solely on our partners to manage our fires until our resources become available.

What do you think the most interesting thing about working with fire is?

I think how critically important the diverse partner relationships are here in the Gorge makes working with fire rewarding!

What role do you see fire playing in forest management and safety management?



Figure 4 A prescribed burn to clear out brush.

Our Fire Team has led the way with our safety program, constantly assessing it and integrating others into a new culture of safety where it is expected. For a long time we have valued providing our firefighters with as much actual fire and prescribed fire experience as possible, promoting them to travel to different areas to maximize this experience. This has paid dividends when initial attacking fires here at home. We are proud that our initial attack forces are the most sought after resources by any of our partners, they have the experience to be calm when faced aggressive fire behavior and make good decisions that not only takes care of themselves but ensures those around them are being as safe as possible.

What would you like people to know about fire management that maybe they don't know?

We are very fortunate that the landowners that have had the experience working with any of our team are outspoken in the support they have shared with us. I've heard it said that we are a bit like a dentist that you like, "Sorry to that I have to see you....but I'm so happy you're here." For those that haven't had the opportunity to get to know any of our Fire Team know that they have an ingrained interest in the environment, all of them truly want to see the Gorge become as resilient to the negative effects of fire but they value the safety of other firefighters and the public above all else.



Figure 5 Figure 6 Forested area after tree thinning for fire safety and habitat improvements.